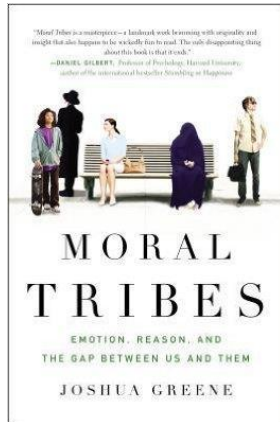


Local Hearts, Global Heads



Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them

By: Joshua Greene

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Review by: Leland R. Beaumont

This is the best book I have read in many years. It provides a new level of clarity on ethical reasoning and essential issues I have been curious about for a very long time.

The book draws on three metaphors:

The first of these metaphors is Me versus Us (issues of morality within a group) and Us versus Them (issues of morality between groups). Morality evolved to enable cooperation within groups, but at the cost of competition between groups. Our need for within-group morality is old enough that evolution has provided the “moral machinery in our brains” in the form of intuitive heart-felt feelings of: right and wrong, love and hate, fear and comfort, joy and sadness, loyalty and jealousy, threats and mercy, vengeance and compassion, fairness and anger, and guilt and shame. The morality of our hearts preserves tribal harmony at the expense of global conflict. It is now time when we must augment this moral machinery with new moral thinking that can solve the problems of intergroup cooperation.

The second metaphor is that “The moral brain is like a dual-mode camera with both automatic settings (such as ‘portrait’ and ‘landscape’) and manual mode.” This metaphor illustrates our System 1 (automatic, fast, intuitive) and System 2 (difficult, deliberate, slow) modes of thinking that are more fully described in the excellent book “Thinking Fast and Slow” by Daniel Kahneman. In the chapter titled “Efficiency, flexibility, and the dual process brain” Greene describes how our fast and efficient emotions help us solve everyday problems of cooperation, yet instinctively provide solutions to intergroup problems that are contrary to more rational and deliberation considerations. Sometimes the right thing to do just feels wrong. What is going on here?

The third metaphor introduces the “common currency” required to allow trade-offs among competing tribal values and resolve the conflict between what our hearts and our heads are telling us to do. He chooses “deep pragmatism” (his proposed renaming of utilitarian philosophy) as this common currency. Greene identifies and addresses the many misunderstandings and objections that have arisen to the

utilitarian philosophies introduced long ago by Bentham and Mill. As he explains, deep pragmatism provides the answers to two essential questions: *What* really matters? *Who* really matters? After an in-depth exploration of these questions, he provides this shorthand answer: “Happiness is what matters, and everyone’s happiness counts the same.”

The automatic settings of our brains quickly solve the moral problems we face every day within our tribe, but we need to switch from automatic to manual mode to deliberately solve intergroup problems from a global perspective. These solutions may not feel right, because they contradict our automatic settings. “The natural world is full of cooperation, from tiny cells to packs of wolves. But all of this teamwork, however impressive, evolved for the amoral purpose of successful competition.” When controversy arises, it is time to switch from automatic mode to manual mode, appeal to the common currency, and reason our way to a solution. “Here we have a choice: We can use our big brains to *rationalize* our intuitive moral convictions or we can *transcend* the limitations of our tribal gut reactions.”

Along the way we learn when it is and is not helpful to appeal to rights, plenty about trolleyology, various interpretations of fairness, and why not to trust in proper nouns or fancy hats.

Section 5 applies the ideas developed in the book to important real-world moral problems. This section includes the most complete, fair, and nuanced analysis of the abortion debate I have ever read. After arriving at the inevitable impasse that results from our conventional thinking, he appeals to the “common currency” and argues coherently and convincingly for a particular decision.

The book concludes with six powerful and pragmatic rules for modern morality that we can all understand and work toward. Because these rules are process-oriented rather than specific moral decrees, they teach us how to think about moral issues. Adopting these rules can help our thinking continue to evolve as we face new and more difficult moral choices.

The book is well argued, well researched, and very well written. It is remarkable because it addresses such a difficult topic in a way that is complete, accurate, and entertaining. Read this book. Re-read this book, and apply all you learn from it to living every day. Strive to accomplish the transition from tribal feelings to global thinking that is essential to living peacefully on this earth.